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The Friends of Tommy Posey

I met one of them in the [National] Guard, one at a gun store, one at a gun show... We had all been in Vietnam, and we wanted to find out what we could do to stop the communists from taking over Central America one country at a time.

—Tommy Posey, Decatur, Ala.

They are small-town, small-time guys who love guns and camouflage suits and manly make-believe. They are Vietnam veterans who think that combat was a kick. They never got over the loss of Indochina, and now, with middle age closing in, they would like to take just one piece of turf back from the communists. They sent a team to Central America a while ago, and then, suddenly, two of its members were dead, shot down in a helicopter over Nicaragua. The Marxist rulers of Nicaragua charged that the dead Americans were mercenaries, agents of the CIA. The initial evidence suggested instead that they were nobody's hired guns, that they had gone to Nicaragua on their own, for nothing more than the chance to fight communism—and for the thrill of being back in the game.

The dead men were Dana Parker, 36, a detective on leave from the police force in Huntsville, Ala., and James Powell, 36, a flight instructor from Memphis, Tenn. They belonged to a group called Civilian-Military Assistance (CMA), which claims 1,000 members, mostly in northern Alabama and southern Tennessee. Parker had served in Vietnam with the Green Berets; Powell had been an Army helicopter pilot in the war. "He got shot down three times over there," said Tommy Posey, a CMA founder, "so he really knew what he was doing."

Nonlethal Goods: What CMA was doing, apparently, was to organize whatever support it could for anticommunists in Central America. The group collected money for medical supplies, uniforms and other nonlethal goods, and it signed up "trainers" who could instruct the champions of democracy in the use of such equipment as helicopters. After a visit to El Salvador last fall, CMA leaders decided that they could do more good by concentrating on the U.S.-backed Nicaraguan rebels, or contras, who were fighting "the communists" on their own soil.

At a news conference in Huntsville last week, Posey described how CMA made contact with the contras. Last November they

wrote a letter to Gen. Gustavo Alvarez Martinez, a hard-liner who commanded the Honduran armed forces at the time. "We got the idea from the newspapers," said Posey. "He was the strongman." The letter was addressed to "Gen. Martinez, Honduran Government, Honduras, Central America." Alvarez replied encouragingly, and in January Posey and three associates flew to Honduras with a load of supplies, as well as a few rifles and pistols "for our own protection." (Posey is a licensed firearms dealer.) Getting past Honduran Customs was no problem; the Americans waved their letter



Posey with arsenal: Not a 'cake-and-ice-cream operation'

from the general and breezed on through.

They went almost directly to the U.S. Embassy. "We showed the letter to an American, he had a business suit on," Posey recalled. "I said, 'Hey, Bud'—I called him Bud because he was younger than me—I said, 'We came here to check in.'" Later, according to Posey, Honduran officials put the team in touch with Honduras-based contras of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force. An FDN official, Alfonso Callejas, encouraged the group to undertake more missions and, Posey said, later flew to Decatur to give CMA's recruiting campaign a boost.

Interviewed by NEWSWEEK in Miami, Callejas said he had run into Posey while the CMA group was touring contra camps along the Honduran border. He confirmed the visit to Decatur, but he said CMA mem-

bers had been "bored by my talk of political conditions. All they wanted to know was what was happening in the hills and what kind of weapons we had." Callejas insisted that CMA was not training FDN troops. "Our campesinos are born guerrillas," he said. "What can a foreigner teach them?"

Evidently Parker and Powell thought they could teach somebody something. They were part of a six-man CMA "training mission" that went to Honduras in late August. They were still there on Sept. 1, when small contra warplanes attacked a military training school in north-central Nicaragua. Calling the school a hotbed of Cubans and Libyans, Reagan administration officials said the raiders had killed four Cuban military advisers. Nicaraguans denied it, saying the body count had run to a woman and three children. At the time, Parker and Powell were based nearby at an

airstrip in Honduras called Jamastran. According to Callejas, word came in that several FDN soldiers had been wounded across the border; the Americans, he said, took off on a "mercy" mission and were killed. "They just wanted to help," said Callejas.

'CIA Mercenaries': Nicaragua's Sandinista regime said the Americans had been shot down during the air raid on the military school, an attack that it blamed on "CIA mercenaries." After quizzing the CIA, Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan of New York, vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said he had been assured that the agency was not involved. But CMA had never made its work a secret; local newspaper coverage even prompted a cautionary visit from an FBI agent earlier this year, according to Posey. U.S. diplomats and military officers in El Salvador and Honduras met with CMA leaders. "I don't know for sure if any of 'em was CIA, but Tegooch is full of Americans," Posey said, referring to Tegucigalpa, the Honduran

capital. Surely the CIA knew—or ought to have known—what CMA was up to, and, if nothing else, the agency acquiesced. At the time, Congress was cutting off covert U.S. aid to the contras, and CMA was offering to take up a small part of the slack.

Posey insisted that the death of his two comrades would not stop the campaign to support the contras. "Good Lord willing, we plan to keep on giving them supplies and assistance," he said. "This right here will help weed out the quitters. We want people for the cause, not people who think this is some kind of cake-and-ice-cream operation." Apparently it hadn't yet dawned on the ever-young men of CMA that they were playing far out of their league.

RUSSELL WATSON with KIM WILLENSON in Washington reports